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ABSTRACT

This information packet provides an overview of learning disabilities. Information includes the following: (1) the definition of learning disability; (2) incidence of learning disabilities; (3) criteria used to decide whether a person has a learning disability; (4) common causes of learning disabilities; (5) the importance of early identification; (6) signs that a child has a learning disability; (7) what actions parents and professionals should take when a child is having difficulty in schools; (8) how an evaluation for special education services can be arranged; (9) common words associated with learning disabilities; and (10) an overview of the legal rights of children and youth who have a learning disability. A checklist of common warning signs of learning disabilities is provided and includes difficulties with organization, physical coordination, spoken or written language, attention and concentration, memory, and social behavior. A chart outlines some of the first signs of trouble in these areas in preschool, lower grades, middle grades, and upper grades. The booklet also describes the types of placements and services that are available to students in need of special education assistance. (CR)

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General Information Packet On Learning Disabilities

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The facts about learning disabilities

What is a learning disability?
Learning disabilities are neurological disorders that interfere with a person's ability to store, process, or produce information, and create a "gap" between one's ability and performance. Individuals with learning disabilities are generally of average or above average intelligence.

Learning disabilities can affect one's ability to read, write, speak, or compute math, and can impede social skills. Learning disabilities can affect one or more areas of development. Individuals with learning disabilities can have marked difficulties on certain types of tasks while excelling at others.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, more than 1 in 6 children (17.5%) will encounter a problem learning to read during the first three years in school. These estimates are consistent with data from ongoing studies at the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD).

Early diagnosis and appropriate intervention and support are critical for individuals with learning disabilities.

Sometimes overlooked as "hidden handicaps", learning disabilities are often not easily recognized, accepted or considered serious once detected.

Learning disabilities often run in families.

Learning disabilities are not cured and do not go away, but individuals can learn to compensate for and even overcome areas of weakness.

Attention deficits and hyperactivity sometimes co-occur with learning disabilities, but not always. Learning disabilities are NOT the same as the following handicaps: mental retardation, autism, deafness, blindness, behavioral disorders.

Federal Law IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, formerly PL 94-142, mandates that all children with learning disabilities are entitled to a "free" and "appropriate" education in "the least restrictive environment."

What can happen when help is not provided?
60% of adults with severe literacy problems were found to have undetected or untreated learning disabilities. (National Adult Literacy and Learning Disabilities Center, 1994)

Adolescents who have learning disabilities are at increased risk for drug and alcohol abuse. One study showed that up to 60% of adolescents in treatment for substance abuse had learning disabilities. (Hazelden Foundation, 1992)

School failure and illiteracy perpetuate a vicious downward cycle of frustration and despair. 35% of students with learning disabilities do not finish high school, contributing greatly to the nation's appalling school drop-out statistics. This percentage only includes those students already identified as learning disabled. (National Longitudinal Transition Study, Wagner 1992).

The majority of students with learning disabilities (62%) were not fully employed one year after graduating from high school. (Wagner 1992).

Learning disabilities and substance abuse are the most frequently cited impairments that inhibit an AFDC (Welfare) client's ability to gain and

retain employment and fiscal independence. (Functional Impairments of AFDC clients, Office of the Inspector General, 1992).

The U.S. Department of Education estimates indicate that 5% of school-aged children in public schools currently receive special education services as students with learning disabilities. These students comprised 51% of the entire identified special education population. This percentage does not take into consideration the tens of thousands of students who attend private and religious schools, many of which currently offer little or nothing by way of support.

Some commonly asked questions about learning disabilities

What are learning disabilities?
The term "learning disability" was coined in 1962 to describe individuals of at least average intelligence who seem capable of school success, but who have unexplained difficulty in acquiring basic academic skills. Since then experts have grappled with developing a definition that is educationally and clinically useful, but also embraces the wide range of characteristics found in those with learning disabilities. In 1975, with the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142), which mandated free and appropriate public education for students with handicapping conditions, a legal definition was developed. Professionals continue to struggle to create a tighter definition for this hidden handicap. They agree that individuals DO NOT have a learning disability when the learning problems and/or school failures are due primarily to:

Impaired vision	*Hearing loss*
Mental retardation	*Environmental factors*
Emotional difficulties	*Cultural differences*

Learning disabilities affect children and adults. The impact of the disability ranges from relatively mild to severe.

What criteria are used to decide whether or not a person has a learning disability?
Professionals, through interviews, observation and multi-disciplinary assessment, determine if an individual meets the following criteria for having a learning disability:

- Has an average or above average intelligence.
- Exhibits unexpected discrepancy between potential and actual achievement.
- Performs poorly because of difficulty in one or more of the following areas:

Listening	*Written expression*
Speaking	*Mathematics*
Reading	*Reasoning*

- Difficulties in concentration and attention, memory and social skills may also be seen in profiles of individuals with learning disabilities.

What are the most common causes of learning disabilities?
Experts do not know precisely what causes learning disabilities. Learning disabilities are presumed to be disorders of the central nervous system and a variety of factors may contribute to their occurrence. Learning disabilities may be due to:

HEREDITY. Learning disabilities tend to run in families. It is not unusual to discover that people with learning disabilities come from families in which other family members have reported similar difficulties.

PROBLEMS DURING PREGNANCY AND BIRTH. Learning disabilities may be caused by illness or injury during or before birth. Learning disabilities

may also be caused by the use of drugs and alcohol during pregnancy, RH incompatibility with the mother (if untreated), premature or prolonged labor, lack of oxygen or low weight at birth.

INCIDENTS AFTER BIRTH. Head injuries, nutritional deprivation, poisonous substances, (e.g., lead) and child abuse can contribute to learning disabilities.

Often there does not appear to be a specific cause for learning disabilities. Parents need not feel guilty or wonder how learning disabilities could have been prevented.

Why is it important to identify learning disabilities as early as possible?
Early diagnosis of learning disabilities, coupled with successful intervention, can help to prevent or reduce academic and social failure. Left untreated, an individual with learning disabilities will often fail academically and experience poor social relationships. Studies have shown that undetected learning disabilities may also lead to anti-social behavior, school drop-out, involvement with the juvenile justice system, poor employment history and illiteracy.

If a child is not progressing at an appropriate rate — don't be complacent! The frustration and consequences of living with an undetected learning disability can be profound.

Does a child who is reversing letters when s/he writes necessarily have learning disabilities?
Reversing letters and numbers is common in many young children and may persist through early elementary school years. Professionals do not consider reversal (confusing *b* and *d*, or *was* and *saw*) to be a sure sign of a learning disability. Behaviors such as these can, however, signal children who are at risk if they persist as the child progresses through school. A combination of "warning signs" is usually the best indication that a child may have difficulty learning skills that are essential for success in school.

What are some of the signs that might indicate a learning disability?
There is no single indicator of learning disabilities. Unless a child manifests several warning signs consistently, and unless the problems persist over time, there probably is no need for concern. See the checklist at the end of this article for guidance.

At what age is an individual entitled to special education services?
In 1975, the Federal government (under Public Law 94-142) mandated that state education agencies provide appropriate education services for school-age students from the age of five through 21. Under the Early Childhood Intervention Act and Public Law 99-457, eligibility for children with special needs to receive services was further extended from birth to age five. A learning disability is one of the educationally handicapping conditions recognized by the Federal government. Check with your State Education Department for more information.

What should be done when a parent or professional first notices that a child is having difficulty in school?
Parents and professionals should each gather information and openly discuss concerns.

Clarification and additional information should be sought from school personnel as well as others who are in regular contact with the child.

Information (direct observation and anecdotal) about the student's academic performance and learning needs should include areas of strength and weakness, both in school and in other settings. Any accommodations that have proven useful to promote success in learning should be noted. Sources of additional information might include: pediatricians, school guidance counselors, school psychologists, teachers, school administrators, professionals who know about testing and evaluation, and learning disabilities organizations.

If a student's difficulties do not improve, what should be done next?
A comprehensive educational evaluation should be arranged by the student's parents or guardians. These evaluations can only take place with the written consent of the parent or guardian. Evaluations are meant to help identify areas of relative strength and difficulty, and to help determine whether the student is eligible for specialized assistance in school.

How can an evaluation be arranged?
When parents and school personnel agree that an evaluation is warranted, the public school system must provide an evaluation to determine if a student is entitled to special education services.

Evaluations can be arranged through the public school system (at no cost), or through private clinics, private evaluators, hospital clinics, or university clinics.

Some school districts may not automatically accept test results from outside sources. Parents should check with their school district before seeking evaluation services from private facilities.

Common warning signs—a checklist

DOES THE INDIVIDUAL HAVE DIFFICULTY WITH:

Organization
- ❑ knowing time, date, year
- ❑ managing time
- ❑ completing assignments
- ❑ organizing thoughts
- ❑ locating belongings
- ❑ carrying out plans
- ❑ making decisions
- ❑ setting priorities
- ❑ sequencing

Physical Coordination
- ❑ manipulating small objects
- ❑ learning self-help skills
- ❑ cutting
- ❑ drawing
- ❑ handwriting
- ❑ climbing and running
- ❑ mastering sports

Spoken or Written Language
- ❑ pronouncing words
- ❑ learning new vocabulary
- ❑ following directions
- ❑ understanding requests
- ❑ relating stories
- ❑ discriminating among sounds
- ❑ responding to questions
- ❑ understanding concepts
- ❑ reading comprehension
- ❑ spelling
- ❑ writing stories and essays

Attention and Concentration
- ❑ completing a task
- ❑ acting before thinking
- ❑ waiting
- ❑ restlessness
- ❑ daydreaming
- ❑ distractibility

Memory
- ❑ remembering directions
- ❑ learning math facts
- ❑ learning new procedures
- ❑ learning the alphabet
- ❑ identifying letters
- ❑ remembering names
- ❑ remembering events
- ❑ studying for tests

Social Behavior
- ❑ making and keeping friends
- ❑ social judgement
- ❑ impulsive behavior
- ❑ frustration tolerance
- ❑ sportsmanship
- ❑ accepting changes in routine
- ❑ interpreting nonverbal cues
- ❑ working cooperatively

Important Note: *This checklist is a guidepost for parents and professionals. It should not be used in isolation, but may lead the parent/professional to seek further assessment. All children exhibit one or more of these behaviors from time to time throughout their childhood. A consistent showing of a group of these behaviors should be considered an indication to seek further advice, observation or assessment.*

What's in a name?

Some words commonly associated with learning disabilities

Dyslexia, perhaps the most commonly known, is primarily used to describe difficulty with language processing and its impact on reading, writing and spelling.

Dyspraxia (Apraxia), difficulty with motor planning, impacts upon a person's ability to coordinate appropriate body movements.

Dysgraphia involves difficulty with writing; problems might be seen in the actual motor patterns used in writing; also characteristic are difficulties with spelling and the formulation of written composition.

Auditory Discrimination is a key component of efficient language use, and is necessary to "break the code" for reading; it involves being able to perceive the differences between speech sounds, and to sequence these sounds into meaningful words.

Visual Perception is critical to the reading and writing processes as it addresses the ability to notice important details and assign meaning to what is seen.

Attention Deficit (Hyperactivity) Disorder (ADD/ADHD) may co-occur with learning disabilities (incidence estimates vary); features can include: marked over-activity, distractibility and/or impulsivity which in turn can interfere with an individual's availability to benefit from instruction.

Legal rights: an overview

Why should parents understand the rights of children and youth who have a learning disability?

Parents are the most effective advocates for children, and knowledge of both entitlements and due process procedures will help them to obtain appropriate services.

The law provides specific legal safeguards for your child.

Over the past two decades, Federal legislation has been enacted to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities. Each state is responsible for implementing the law, and states vary in how they choose to provide services. It is therefore important to understand the service delivery model in your state.

What are my rights as a parent of a

child with a learning disability?

1. Identification Of The Disability:
When you suspect that your child has a learning disability, you have the right to...

- **Request** that a comprehensive assessment be

conducted by the school system at no cost to you.

• **Receive notice** and give (or refuse to give) consent before an evaluation may take place.

• **Have your child tested** in all areas of suspected educational need. Eligibility for special education services will be determined by a multi-disciplinary team including at least one teacher, and other specialists with knowledge in the areas of suspected disability. Members of this team may include: school psychologist, speech/language pathologist, and/or remedial reading teacher.

• **Examine** all of your child's records.

• **Receive copies** of evaluation results and have them explained in language that is easily understood. You may request an independent evaluation at public expense if you disagree with the school's evaluation. However, be sure to check with your school district regarding policies for reimbursement; also be sure to clarify how independent data are considered in the evaluation process.

• **Have the school** evaluation team consider all independent evaluation findings when determining your child's educational needs.

• **A complete re-evaluation** every three years or, more frequently, if needed.

2. Special Education Services:
If your child is found to be eligible for Special Education services, you have the right to...

• **Have your child** receive special education services (and related services) at public expense. (These services are funded completely by State Education dollars; private insurance coverage should not be considered by the school district when planning for educational services.)

• **Have an Individualized Educational Program (IEP)** in effect within thirty school days of the date when eligibility for services was determined.

• **Participate** in all meetings regarding the development, revision, and review of the IEP. You also have the right to have meetings scheduled at times which are mutually convenient for you and school personnel.

• **Have an advocate** or someone of your choice accompany you to IEP meetings.

• **Have an interpreter** present at the meetings if you are hearing impaired or if your native language is other than English.

• **Receive a copy** of your child's IEP.

• **Withhold consent** to a proposed placement or program.

• **Have your child** receive services that are educationally appropriate, and that are delivered in the least restrictive environment.

• **Request a re-evaluation** if you feel that your child's educational needs have changed.

• **Be informed** of your child's ongoing progress.

Additional rights and safeguards are provided to insure that all children with special education needs receive appropriate services and supports. For additional information, contact your local school district, State Department of Education, or NCLD.

Learning Disabilities. What to look for: Some first signs of trouble.

	Preschool	Lower Grades	Middle Grades	Upper Grades
Language	Pronunciation problems. Slow vocabulary growth. Lack of interest in story telling.	Delayed decoding abilities for reading. Trouble following directions. Poor spelling.	Poor reading comprehension. Lack of verbal participation in class. Trouble with word problems.	Weak grasp of explanations. Foreign language problems. Poor written expression. Trouble summarizing.
Memory	Trouble learning numbers, alphabet, days of week, etc. Poor memory for routines.	Slow recall of facts. Organizational problems. Slow acquisition of new skills. Poor spelling.	Slow or poor recall of math facts. Failure of automatic recall.	Trouble studying for tests. Weak cumulative memory. Slow work pace.
Attention	Trouble sitting still. Extreme restlessness. Lack of persistence at tasks.	Impulsivity, lack of planning. Careless errors. Distractibility.	Inconsistency. Poor self-monitoring. Poor ability to discern relevant detail.	Memory problems due to weak attention. Mental fatigue.
Fine Motor Skills	Trouble learning self-help skills (eg. tying shoe laces). Clumsiness. Reluctance to draw or trace.	Unstable pencil grip. Trouble with letter formation.	Fist-like or tight pencil grip. Illegible, slow or inconsistent writing. Reluctance to write.	Lessening relevance of fine motor skills.
Other Functions	Trouble learning left from right (possible visual spatial confusion). Trouble interacting (weak social skills).	Trouble learning about time (temporal sequential disorganization). Poor grasp of math concepts.	Poor learning strategies. Disorganization in time or space. Peer rejection.	Poor grasp of abstract concepts. Failure to elaborate. Trouble taking tests, multiple choice (eg. SAT's).

Adopted from Melvin D. Levine, M.D., F.A.A.P. - THEIR WORLD, 1990. These lists are guideposts for parents, teachers and others involved. They should not be used in isolation, but may lead you to seek further assessment. Many children will, from time to time, have difficulty with one or more of these items. They should always be reviewed in a broader context of understanding about a child.

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What types of placements and services are available to students in need of special education assistance?

IDEA requires that children receive educational services that are appropriate and that are delivered in the least restrictive environment.

Service delivery options include:

- Regular Class without Accommodations
- Regular Classes with In-class Accommodations
- Regular Class plus Supplementary Instructional Services

- Part-time Special Education Class
- Full-time Special Education Class
- Special Day School
- Homebound Instruction in Hospital, Residential, or Total Care Setting

Related services provided to students with learning disabilities may include:

- Counseling/psychotherapy
- Speech/language therapy
- Occupational therapy

Are There Other Laws Under Which An Individual Can Receive Assistance?
Children who do not meet the eligibility requirements for services under IDEA may be eligible for services under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

This law states that public schools must address the needs of children who are considered "handicapped" as adequately as those who are non-handicapped. ("Handicapped" is defined as a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits a "major life activity", including learning.)

Examples of possible accommodations include:

- Restructuring the learning environment;
- Repeating and simplifying instructions about in-class and homework assignments;
- Supplementing verbal instructions with visual cues or printed instructions;
- Using behavior management techniques;
- Adjusting class schedules;
- Modifying testing procedures;
- Using tape recorders, computer-assisted instruction, and audio-visual equipment;
- Modifying textbooks and workbooks;
- Modifying homework assignments.

Adults with disabilities are also guaranteed reasonable accommodations through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), including job modifications, changes in the physical environment, and access to specialized equipment.

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